

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH PHARMACIST'S MATE SECOND CLASS
GEORGE WAHLEN, USN

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Interview with former PhM2c George Wahlen, Medal of Honor recipient for action at Iwo Jima. PhM2c Wahlen served with the Second Battalion, Twenty-sixth Marines, Fifth Marine Division.

You were born in Ogden, UT.

That's right.

When did you decide to join the Navy?

In 1943 I volunteered for the draft. As I remember, that's what you had to do if you weren't yet 21.

Wouldn't that mean they could put you in any service they chose?

That's right. As I recall, you had to have your parents' consent if you were under 21. I was 18.

You went down and registered with the local draft board?

I was already registered. I just volunteered.

Did you then get called up?

Once you were called up they had people at the induction center and they had the Navy, Marines, the Army, and the Army Air Corps there. I had initially wanted to go into the Air Corps because I had been trained as an aircraft engine mechanic and was working at the Air Force base at the time. Down at the draft board they told me they had a real need for Navy people. I tried to explain to them that I was an aircraft engine mechanic and that's what I wanted to do. They said they had airplanes in the Navy so I ended up in the Navy.

Where did you actually join up?

Fort Douglas, UT, near Salt Lake City.

Where did you go from there?

To boot camp at San Diego.

What do you remember about that experience?

I didn't do too well initially. I couldn't march; I had two left feet. I remember they had me marching at night between 6 and 9 on the grinder there with my sea bag and hammock.

The grinder was the parade field?

Yes. Well, I learned pretty fast.

This was in 1943?

Yes. I joined the Navy on the 11th of June '43. Boot camp was 4 weeks long.

And I'll bet you didn't get sent to aviation mechanic school.
They sent me to Hospital Corps School.

Was that somewhat of a surprise?

Yes. I went to talk to a lieutenant commander and told him my sad story and he said, "Why don't you go to school and maybe they can help you there." So I went to Hospital Corps School in Balboa Park and there talked to a chief warrant officer who was in charge of the school. I told him I had been an aircraft mechanic and that I wanted to get into that field. He listened to me and told me that if I did real well in the school he would see what he could do to get me transferred.

What kind of things did they teach you in Hospital Corps School?

I can't remember. It's almost too long ago but generally we learned patient treatment--giving shots, drawing blood, doing some stitching, and that sort of thing. But of course, I stayed up studying because of what that chief warrant officer told me.

So, I had 8 weeks of hospital corps school, worked real hard, and graduated in the top 25 of my class of four or five-hundred people. I went and showed the warrant officer my diploma and reminded him what he had promised me. He kind of grinned and said, "We need good men in the Hospital Corps."

So you did well and he double crossed you.

Yes. Anyhow, I went to work on the ward there at Balboa Park. Back then they gave an examination for promotion every month. I asked the apprentice corpsmen on the ward why they hadn't taken the test. They told me that when you got promoted they sent you with the Marines or to sea. I remember saying that I didn't like what I was doing but at least I wanted to get paid for it. So I went and took the test and got promoted to hospital apprentice first class. The following month I got promoted to pharmacist's mate third class.

That was pretty quick.

It was because I studied so hard. When I made pharmacist's mate third class I had but 5 months in the Navy.

After that the head ward nurse got on my case about something and threatened to send me to the Marine Corps. I had been giving that some thought anyhow. I had met several marines on the ward and talked to them about the Marines. I remember saying to that nurse,

"Sister, you're not sending me anywhere," and I went over to the master of arms shack and volunteered. The petty officer told me to pack my bags and be ready at 8:00 a.m. to go.

Did you have any idea where you were going?

I was aware that field medical training was at Camp Elliott, CA. Anyhow, I packed my bags and was there the next morning with 14 of us going to the Marines. Eleven of them were in brig uniforms. Those uniforms were white with prisoner written on the back.

These were men who had committed some infraction?

They had been in the brig.

Do you remember anything about your Camp Elliott experience?

That was quite a strict disciplinary company, kind of like marine boot camp maybe. You learned medical, the firing range, infiltration courses, and that sort of thing. I think all that was 8 weeks of training. I remember some of the prisoners on that base. They had shaved heads and were being run around with marine MP guards who double-timed them everywhere they went.

You weren't in this group of guys?

No. But I could see what was going on. We went through 8 weeks of this and then went to Camp Pendleton in January 1944. That's where I joined a Marine infantry company.

Had you a chance to practice any of your medical skills by then?

I had worked on the ward for a few months at Balboa Park after I got out of Corps school.

What happened at Camp Pendleton?

I had been there 2 or 3 days forming a company. The company commander told us he was taking us on a 20-mile forced march at night. I happened to be the senior corpsman in the company at the time. He said to me, "Doc, you march at the head of the column with me." And he had that company spread over 100 or 200 yards. Every hour we'd take a 10-minute break. "Hey Doc, go back and check with the other corpsmen and see how everybody is." I double-timed back and would check with them. There was a corpsman at the end of each platoon. Then I'd double time back to the commander and when I got there he'd say, "Let's go." So that was my first real experience with the Marines.

So, you never got any rest.

Everybody else did but me. When we got in that night, or rather in the morning, the corpsmen stayed up and took care of blisters while everybody else got to hit the sack.

It seemed that from then on though, it wasn't so bad and we got used to it.

You were in pretty good physical shape.

Yes, we were. In our battalion with our 40 corpsmen, we only lost one corpsman, who fell out on a hike.

How long were you at Camp Pendleton?

We were training for amphibious landings, combat training, and living in the field most of the time. We were there until July of '44. I think that's about the time the Guam and Saipan invasions were going on. We were aboard ship and thinking we were going to Guam. After we got out to sea they decided that it was pretty well secured so we went to Hawaii to Camp Tarawa on the big island for more training. We trained there until we hit Iwo. We spent a year training with the Marines.

What did that training consist of?

We went out in the field and the battalion surgeon or our chief handed out tags for injuries. We'd apply bandages and treat simulated casualties, splint arms and legs and that sort of thing. And then we'd put on the tag indicating exactly what you had done.

Did you practice any amphibious landings?

Yes. That was almost continuous from the beginning in California and then in Hawaii.

Did you use LVTs or LCVPs?

The regular landing craft with the ramps.

How long were you at Camp Tarawa.

Until January of '45.

How did you learn you were going to Iwo Jima?

We didn't know for sure until we were aboard ship. We spent 45 days aboard ship going to Iwo.

Forty-five days?

Yes.

What kind of a ship was it?

It was a troop transport but I can't remember the name of it. We got to Iwo on February 19th.

What do you remember about that day?

We were told that our regiment was going to be in reserve so we weren't to go in initially. Early in the morning we got up to eat. They were telling us over the loud speaker what was going on on Iwo, about the landings and so on. The early landings didn't encounter a lot of opposition. When they were pretty much packed in on the beaches, the Japanese opened up with lots of artillery and mortars.

About noon we got word that we were going in. In the early afternoon we boarded landing boats. We were off Iwo away and were going in a circle and close enough to see the island. Everybody was looking over the edge and being real concerned about what was going on. An artillery shell hit very close to us and threw water over the boat. From then on everybody stayed down. Other than that we didn't draw any more fire. When we finally went in to make the landing we went in almost in a column. Apparently there was an area that wasn't drawing any fire. Once we got in close to the beach, the boats spread out and made their landing.

You were on LCVPs with ramps.

Yes.

What did you have for gear?

All I had was a carbine, a .45, my medical kit and a poncho.

What was in the medical kit?

Battle dressings, tourniquets, a tracheotomy instrument, as I recall. We had serum albumin to give IVs. There was only one bottle of that and it was a small bottle. We used that instead of plasma.

Were you relatively unopposed when you hit the beach?

We spread out on the beach and that volcanic sand was up past our ankles and close to knee-deep in places. I remember hitting the ground and wasn't too far from my lieutenant. One of the platoon runners crawled up and said that he had lost his carbine coming out of the boat. The lieutenant said, "There's plenty of dead around, go find one." The young marine crawled along the beach and found a dead marine. He rolled him over. The man had been hit right between the eyes, blood all over him. The marine pulled the rifle away from him. He was just an 18-year-old marine and I remember how pale and shocked he was. It kind of gave you a feeling: We're really

in a war now. It was a shocking experience.

You were close by and saw this happen.

I saw this happen. I was maybe 40 or 100 feet from him.

I'm sure you didn't linger in this place.

Actually we lay there for quite a while until we got word to move up.

You really had little cover where you were.

We were just there on the beach. And there were a lot of casualties, a lot of dead and damaged equipment. It was kind of a mess.

And I'm sure it was pretty noisy too.

Yes, but for some reason we didn't get any casualties.

So you finally got word to move out.

We moved up off the beach toward the center of the island. The island was shaped like a pork chop. You almost had to look for a place to dig a hole because there were so many marines. It was pretty concentrated. Once we got off the beach the ground was much harder so it was more difficult to dig. That night there were a lot of tracers and fire was directed into Mt. Suribachi. There were flares up all night long. My platoon stayed dug in in that area. Part of the 28th Regiment moved up closer to Suribachi. We were behind them.

Were you able to get any sleep that first night?

Not very much. I might have dozed a couple of times. One time I was about half dozed off and I something lit in my hole. I shocked me; I thought it was a grenade. I looked for it but couldn't find anything. The next morning a big hunk of shrapnel had landed in my hole and just missed me.

The next day we moved up a bit further north and dug in again. We still did not get involved in direct action. The platoon was in a type of circular defense. My platoon leader, LT Jim Cassidy was up checking the platoon. He had done that once or twice during the day. A sniper raised up out of a spider trap in the ground and shot him. The bullet hit him in the chest. He was the first casualty I treated. He was semi-conscious and we got him evacuated right away. He died aboard ship.

My platoon sergeant was in charge. His name was Joe Malone. He had been a paratrooper. We got the word to move out across this open terrain. He was leading the platoon and an artillery hit almost

at his feet. It blew him in the air. I wasn't too far from him and so I was to him almost immediately. It had torn off one of his legs, part of his hand, and part of his face. I put a tourniquet on his leg and his arm, and put a battle dressing on his face. Within minutes a stretcher team came behind us and they evacuated him back to the beach.

We weren't too far up the island at this point, not far from Mt. Suribachi. He survived his wounds. In fact, when I was back on Guam later as a patient, I was able to go see him. He passed away a few years ago.

This happened on the second day?

Yes, on the 20th. By the time I had finished taking care of him, my platoon had moved out and I tried to catch up with them. I recall trying to crawl up beside a marine with a flame thrower and I asked him where the rest of my platoon was. About the time I got to him, two Japanese soldiers jumped out of a cave and charged us. He opened up on both of them with the flame-thrower. That was a terrible experience seeing those two people burned to death right in front of you.

Did you catch up with your unit?

Shortly afterward I did and ran into one of my people who had been hit in the stomach. I pulled his blouse off. He had been hit several times in the stomach and as I pulled his jacket off, his intestines just plopped out. The treatment for that was to put a wet battle dressing over the wound and give him a shot of morphine. I did that and left him there on the ridge of a hill and then went down to my platoon. When I got there I found that they had picked up a lot of casualties. I spent a lot of time taking care of them and trying to get them evacuated. I was one busy corpsman.

Had you started to run out of battle dressings by this time?

One of the marines told another corpsman by the name of George Long that we had a lot of casualties down in a nearby valley. The marine told him to get down there and take care of them. George told the marine, "You're crazy if you think I'm going down there." Then the marine told him that I had already gone down there and so George came down. On the way he got hit in the arm by machine gun fire or a sniper. So then I had to treat him too. He and I then spent the rest of the day taking care of casualties until we finally ran out of medical supplies. I remember sitting there taking a break and telling him to go back to the command post to get more supplies. He said, "I'm not going back there."

"Well, I'm senior, and I'm telling you to go back." He said, "If you're senior, then you go back." We discussed that for awhile and finally I went back to get some supplies.

When I got back to the CP [command post], the company commander asked me how things were going. I told him. Then I grabbed a couple of medical kits.

By this time you had lost your carbine.

I lost it early in the fighting. A BAR [Browning Automatic Rifle] man had had his weapon destroyed when a mortar round hit so I gave him my carbine. I had found out early on that a corpsmen really needed both hands and it was real difficult to handle a carbine. A carbine was a real liability. One time I tried to pick it up to leave an area that was real hot and it caught on a branch and almost pulled me down so I was kind of glad to get rid of it.

Before I went back, I had another experience. As I was going up a hill they opened up on us with machine gun fire. Of course, everybody hit the ground and we got the word to pull back. As we did I saw two marines on my right flank had been hit. I crawled over to them to see if I could help but both had been killed outright. As I started to crawl away, a grenade landed right beside me. It was there long enough for me to realize what it was before it went off and I caught the concussion right in my face. It about half way knocked me unconscious. I had grenade fragments in my face and I could feel the blood. I put a battle dressing on my right eye. As I started to crawl away from there someone was hollering for a corpsman on my left flank. I tried to crawl over to see if I could help him and grenades were landing all around him so I couldn't get to him. But I could see where the grenades were coming from. I had no grenades, just a .45. I hollered for one of the marines down the hill to throw me a grenade. Several landed quite close to me so I grabbed one and started crawling up the hill towards the place the grenades were coming from. As I was crawling up I was catching grenade fragments in the back of my legs and my butt. There was a big hole in the ground where the grenades were coming from. As I got up to the side of it I went to pull the pin out of the grenade but the ring came off and the pin stayed in. As I lay there, I was getting machine gun fire from further up the hill. I can't understand why I was so calm under those circumstances but I took my K-bar knife out and straightened out that pin. I then pulled the pin out and looked over at the hole where the grenades were coming from. It was about 8 or 9 feet across and maybe that deep. There was a Japanese soldier down there. There was an interlocking tunnel and he was right there throwing grenades out as fast as he could.

I was close enough to him where I could have shot him with my .45, but there I was with an armed grenade so I let the spoon flip off, counted to 3 and just lobbed it right at his feet. That thing went off almost as soon as it hit the ground. So I got some more concussion from my own grenade.

I was able to crawl back down the hill. The marine that was down there had his leg all torn up and couldn't walk. I tried to get him to crawl out but he could hardly move. I bandaged up his leg and about that time a marine crawled up beside us with a stretcher. We rolled him onto the stretcher and we both crawled off that hill pulling him along on the stretcher.

You were pretty badly chewed up by this time.

I had to laugh after I wrote to my folks. My dad's favorite saying when we weren't doing what we ought to be doing was, "Get the lead out." I wrote to him and said, he could legitimately say that now that I had lead in my butt.

Now you're all shot up and they have to evacuate you and you say, "Forget it, I'm staying." What happened then?

It was when I went back to get the medical supplies, that's when the company commander wanted to evacuate me. I had already been injured. Anyhow, I just stayed with the company. A day or two later an adjacent platoon had been hit. I volunteered to go over and take care of casualties there. One of their corpsmen was one of the casualties. I think my citation said that I took care of 14 casualties while under mortar fire.

What kind of medical care had you given yourself? Had your eye been injured?

No. But I still have a piece of grenade fragment in my cheekbone right near my eye.

But you had shrapnel wounds in your leg, your butt, and everywhere else.

Later on when we were going over some open terrain we had a bunch of casualties from mortars and artillery. I was pulling a marine down off a hill with my arms under his shoulder, when a mortar or artillery shell hit right behind me and hit me in the shoulder and the back. It felt like I'd been hit with a sledge hammer the way it knocked me flat. It had taken a big chunk of flesh out my shoulder and kind of numbed my arm for a while but I did get the feeling back.

How many times had you been wounded by this time?

I never counted the time I was hit in the butt by all the grenade fragments because I never was treated for those wounds. The fragments from those grenades were fairly small. But I could tell they were there because they stung like crazy.

When did you receive your last wound?

On March 3rd. But I had been hit a day or two before in the shoulder.

Besides being hit, do you remember any other activity on March 3?

That day I was hit for the last time, I was up looking for a casualty. We had advanced to a forward position. The sergeant or somebody told me where the casualty was. The rest of the company was dug in and I was looking for him. I walked by this big shell hole and there were four or five marines in there. And as I was walking by a shell hit that hole. I got part of the shrapnel in my leg. Two of the marines were killed outright, another lost a leg, and the other lost two legs.

Did you have to deal with them?

The fragment I got tore off my boot and broke my leg. I sat down and put a battle dressing on my leg and gave myself a shot of morphine. That was always the treatment to prevent the patient from going into shock. I then crawled over to take care of the marines. Shortly after I got to the hole a couple of replacement corpsmen came up began helping to treat them. About 50 yards out someone else was hollering for a corpsman. So I crawled out and found the marine who had been hit in the leg and shoulder. I helped him into a hole and bandaged him up and gave him a shot of morphine.

Let me see if I have this correct. You had been wounded in the shoulder by a mortar fragment, you just had your leg broken, you had applied a battle dressing and given yourself a shot of morphine, and then you crawled to this other guy. And while all this is happening, there's still heavy fire going on.

Yes, we were still getting some mortar fire. Anyhow, they finally got around to evacuating me. When they carried me back on a litter, we got ambushed by a machine gun. The litter bearers dropped me and ran for cover. Finally someone took out the machine gun and they came back and got me.

How long were you lying out there when this machine gun action was going on?

Not very long. With that shot of morphine, I felt braver than I ever had while I was in that battle. I remember crawling off the stretcher to go after that machine gun nest but someone else got there first.

Where did they take you?

To a battalion aid station.

Was it near the beach?

No, it wasn't too far from where we were. The battalion aid station was normally with the battalion CP headquarters in that general vicinity.

What did they do for you there?

They just rebandaged my leg and put a splint on it. Then I went back to a field hospital. I remember the night in that field hospital. One corpsman was told to give me some plasma. I told him, "I don't need plasma! I'll tell you when I need it." I really hadn't lost that much blood. The next day I was evacuated aboard ship.

Where did they take you?

Aboard a transport like the one we had come to Iwo on. I went back to Guam. Aboard ship they put a cast on my foot up to about my knee. The break was above my ankle--the tibia. It kind of splintered down into my ankle. It pained me like the devil because I couldn't move my knee without that bone moving. When I got back to Guam I told the doctor that the cast had to be above my knee. So they put on a new cast that went above the knee and that took care of the problem.

Where did you go from Guam?

From Guam I went back to the naval hospital in Pearl Harbor. I was there when they invaded Okinawa. A little while after that I was evacuated back to the states--the naval hospital in Oakland.

Well, that was the end of your war, right there.

Yes. I was in Oakland for a week or two and then they sent me back to the Navy hospital at Camp Pendleton. I was there until December of '45. I had several operations on my leg.

Have you ever had any problems with it since?

I know it's still there but I stay active. I notice that if I don't exercise regularly it bothers me. But I play racquet ball three or four times a week.

Do any of your other wounds bother you?

No. They weren't that serious.

How did you learn you were put in for the Medal of Honor?

When I was at the hospital at Camp Pendleton I was awarded two Navy Crosses. Then in September I got orders to go back to Washington. I was to fly there. They gave me a reporting time and a date but no one ever told me what it was for. There was a lot going on as far as raising bonds and patriotic things and I thought I would be involved in that. I got to New York and took the train down to Washington, DC. I had a couple of days so I just found me a room and stayed there until I was to report to the Navy building. When I reported in there a commander was pretty upset. He asked me where I had been and that they had been looking all over for me. I told him that this was my reporting date and here I was. That's when I heard that I was getting the Medal of Honor. I was overwhelmed. I couldn't believe it. It seems my parents had known ahead of time but were told not to say anything. So they were in Washington too.

What do you remember about the big day at the White House?

There were 14 of us being awarded the Medal of Honor, 3 Navy and 11 Marines. There was also Bob Bush and CDR George Street, a submarine commander.

Did they have you seated in chairs on the lawn?

Yes. When my name was called I went up and reported to the president. That was quite an experience. Having seen all that brass and all those stars. The highest rank I had ever talked to was my company commander or a Navy doctor.

Did President Truman say anything to you?

I was the first Navy corpsman to receive the Medal of Honor during World War II. As I reported to him he said, "I'm sure glad we finally got a pill pusher up here."

So you got up there even before Bob Bush.

Yes. Iwo happened before Okinawa. I think they gave the medals in the order of the battles but I don't remember specifically.

What happened after that?

Of course, this was all part of the celebration of Nimitz Day. There was a parade and we got to meet ADM Nimitz.

What do you remember about him?

I was really impressed with him. I talked with him and got his autograph. He was leading the parade and the Medal of Honor recipients were in convertibles behind him. It was quite an experience, that's for sure.

When were you discharged from the Navy?

In December '45 and I got home in time for Christmas.

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Following the war, George Wahlen went to college, got a job with the Railway Mail Service, and then joined the Army as a master sergeant. After a 20-year career, he retired with the rank of major. In his long and unusual military career, George Wahlen wore the uniform of three services.